

# Indiana House of Representatives

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## News and Information

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### **STATE REP. RUSS STILWELL'S STATEHOUSE REPORT**

INDIANAPOLIS – As we enter the second month of the 2005 session of the Indiana General Assembly, there is a great deal of activity throughout the Statehouse, so let's talk about what's taking place.

I'm sure you've seen the news about the governor's latest proposal to reduce funding for Indiana schools, a move that could cause program cuts, larger class sizes and teacher layoffs. The Indiana Department of Education has said that it will not make deficiency support payments to school corporations, starting as early as March, and that it was highly unlikely that the administration would make up the lost funding.

This decision amounts to a \$52 million cut in state support for local schools by the end of this calendar year. It follows the governor's proposal to "flat-line" school funding in the new biennial state budget, a move that translates to another cut in support.

These are real cuts in funding for schools. Historically, we have set aside money in the state budget for these deficiency payments because the school funding formula provides only a 'snapshot' of enrollment in our schools. Through these deficiency payments, we make sure that schools get the funding that was promised. By refusing to make these payments, the administration is failing to live up to that promise.

By cutting funding to schools, the administration is telling local officials that they must make up the lost dollars on their own. They will be forced to make cuts in programs and personnel. That means larger class sizes, fewer teachers and fewer extracurricular programs – exactly the things that will reverse recent improvements seen in our state's educational system.

I will do everything in my power to make sure that schools get the funds promised to them, and help them avoid the loss of support that can lead to program cuts and teacher layoffs.

Many of you have expressed your concerns about House Bill 1184, which would hurt many Hoosier workers and waste taxpayer dollars. The measure would raise the dollar threshold for taxpayer-funded projects that require workers to be paid a common construction wage. Without that protection, anyone who works on a taxpayer-funded project costing less than \$500,000 will be paid wages at levels substantially less than what they would make on a private project.

This plan would harm those who work on road projects, as well as plumbers, electricians, sheet metal workers, carpenters and others who help build schools and facilities like the state museum and the Indiana Convention Center.

This bill, along with the governor's decision to eliminate the right of state employees to bargain for salaries, health care and other benefits, makes me worried that the reform measures of the new administration and legislative leadership may do harm to working men and women in Indiana. I will do everything I can to protect Hoosier workers in this session.

I also must mention an effort to supposedly reduce the size of government that could reduce citizen involvement in the process. The governor wants to eliminate most of the more than 300 statutory boards and commissions currently in existence in Indiana.

A measure outlining that goal (House Bill 1188) was changed by the House Government and Regulatory Reform

Committee to make sure there is a thorough review of the effectiveness of all of those groups before any recommendations are made on eliminating them.

It always is good to make government leaner and more efficient. I believe it is wrong to eliminate boards and commissions simply to be getting rid of them, because many of these groups have helped enact legislation that has benefitted numerous people in Indiana. It sounds funny that Indiana has an egg board, until you realize this group brings together farmers, retailers and consumer representatives to make sure that our state provides the best possible product.

Under consideration for possible elimination are such groups as the Commission on Aging, the Commission for a Drug-Free Indiana, the Commission on Autism, the State Board of Education, the Commission on Mental Health, the Kids First Trust Board, the State Fair Advisory Board, the Workers Compensation Board of Indiana, and boards that help oversee Indiana's Schools for the Blind and Deaf.

Remember that most of these boards and commissions are made up of average citizens, like you and me. It seems strange for our governor to continually talk about getting the public more involved in government when he wants to drastically cut down one of the ways that Hoosiers actually can take part.

Here are other highlights from the House:

PHONE DEREGULATION – Members of the House Technology, Research and Development Committee heard testimony on a plan that would free major local telephone service providers from state regulations and pricing caps after 2010. A vote has not been set on House Bill 1518, but this measure has the potential to be one of the most controversial to be considered during the 2005 session.

Supporters of the measure – which include SBC , Verizon and Sprint, as well as the Indiana Chamber of Commerce and the Indiana AFL-CIO – say it will spur more investment in telecommunications technology and broadband services, and help provide new products and services at lower prices.

Opponents of House Bill 1518 – which include the AARP, the Citizens Action Coalition and United Senior Action – say it will remove any state regulatory control over telephone service and lead to large rate increases for consumers, particularly those on fixed incomes.

OPEN CONTAINERS – Representatives approved House Bill 1057, which would penalize the driver or any passenger carrying an open container of alcohol in a car. Current state law only prohibits open alcohol containers if the driver has a blood-alcohol level of .04 percent or higher. By making the change, Indiana will make sure that it is able to use \$15 million in federal funding for road projects.

ROAD FUNDING – The House Roads and Transportation Committee passed House Bill 1336, which would change the state's local road funding formula to include pickup truck registrations. Presently, that formula distributes funding to counties based on numbers of passenger vehicle registrations, which means that counties with large urban areas get a larger share of road dollars. By including pickup trucks in the formula, rural areas will get more road funding without a gas tax increase. If this change takes effect, 77 of Indiana's 92 counties will see more road money.

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